

WISCONSIN CERTIFIED PUBLIC MANAGER PROGRAM

PHASE I WRITTEN PROJECT

The final requirement of Phase I of the Wisconsin Certified Public Manager Program is a written project or report. There are two alternatives:

(1) Description of a supervisory situation in which you were involved.

This should be

- written from your point of view as a supervisor, and
- should focus on an issue related to the management and direction of one or more individuals.

If you choose this alternative, your report should have the following sections:

- Introduction of the Problem or Situation
- Description of the Problem or Situation: What happened?
- Description of Supervisory Action Taken: What did you do?
- Description of Results: What happened as a result of what you did?
- Reflections/Evaluation: If you had to do it over, would you do things the same, or differently? Why? How would you change?

(2) A reflection on effective supervisory practices. Describe three supervisory situations -- where you have either been the supervisor or have been supervised -- and what you have learned about effective supervision from those experiences. The paper must reflect an understanding of what are “best” supervisory practices as generally understood in current practice. The paper should not be a description of (or diatribe about) ineffective supervisory practices. Rather, if you discuss an ineffective practice, focus on what might have been a *more effective* practice.

For either report you can consider such things as: a performance appraisal you conducted, or in which you participated; a disciplinary action you took; the delegation of responsibility; the incorporation of planning strategies into your work unit; how a disruptive or difficult employee was handled; how a service delivery problem was solved; or how productivity was improved in your work unit.

The accompanying guide contains information that will help you in writing a better report. Even if you regularly write reports, you should read this guide, if only to refresh your memory on important points.

This is not a comprehensive guide to technical or report writing; the resources listed at the end of the guide can give you more assistance. The guide does suggest the details we will be looking for in reviewing your report.

Some technical details:

- Your report must be typed. Assume that this report is being given to your superior, and present it as you would to that person.
- Your report must have a cover page that identifies who you are (name and agency). This cover page should include the address to which feedback should be sent. However, in the report itself you should not use the name of your agency, or the name of any individual. When we receive your report, we will remove the cover page from it; henceforth, the agency and individuals within the report will only be identifiable if you provide the details that would let an outsider do so. Create an agency name and staff it with imaginary people. While we hold all projects in confidence, we are aware of the weaknesses of organizations, systems, and individuals, and we want to protect you by assuring that what you write will never come back to haunt you.
- Your report should be approximately 10 pages long (double-spaced). This is only a general guideline. If you find your report is much longer or much shorter, read again through the guidelines and the manual for the report, to be sure that you have covered what needs to be presented, in a clear, coherent and concise manner.

Your report also should be sure to:

- Identify whether you are choosing Alternative 1 or Alternative 2
- Identify purpose or audience
- Use appropriate structure and presentation
- Follow accepted rules for paragraphs, sentences, word usage and basic grammar.

DO NOT feel that you must describe a moment of glory, or demonstrate what a good supervisor you were if you choose Alternative 1. We all have erred, and we have learned from those mistakes. Indeed, the ability to admit to mistakes, examine them, and thereby improve, is the mark of a mature person.

AGAIN, we caution you against including anything in your report that identifies you, your agency, or any individual. If you attach a report or form (for example, of a disciplinary action), be sure to remove or mark out any names or identifying agency symbols.

If you are not sure whether a topic you have in mind is appropriate, we recommend you call us before beginning the report. We also encourage you to call if you have any questions as you write the report.

When you submit your report, we will read it for content and form. If either do not meet standards, we will return the report with our comments and notes. You cannot "fail" this assignment. We will work with you until you have written an acceptable report. In some rare cases we may recommend that you take a more extensive writing course, either at your local technical college or through a university.

Projects that meet standards of form and content will not be returned, but will be retained in the CPM Program Office. We recommend you make a copy of your report, either for future reference, or in the event that the report is lost in the mail or misplaced.

For more information, please contact Robbi Dreifuerst at 608-262-3830

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A GUIDE TO REPORT WRITING

PREPARED FOR

THE WISCONSIN CERTIFIED PUBLIC MANAGER PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

What is a formal report? It is an orderly written message used to communicate information objectively and concisely. Reports differ, based on their purpose or objective and the audience for whom they are written. Report writers assist in decision making. As a report writer, you will be writing for your supervisor, or for someone in a decision making position. Your report should help the decision maker:

Sometimes the purpose of the report is clear; as a writer, you know what you hope will happen as a result of someone reading the report. However, even a report which appears to have no immediate result should be thought of as having a result. For example, suppose that you were writing a report on the current status of services being provided to Hmong populations, to be given to all county social service agencies. Although the report is an information vehicle, it also may result in a better understanding of services being provided, and a more consistent delivery of those benefits.

Reports are written for many reasons. Among those are:

- to present results in an accurate, orderly manner
- to help in decision making
- to allow people in different locations to have the same information at the same time
- to present a specific solution to a problem, or persuade the reader to adopt a specific course of action
- to evaluate many aspects of a subject

Reports may also be oral. A written report, however, is useful because it allows the reader to review facts and key points. It is a record upon which future decisions, evaluations and actions can be based. It provides a history of the program, or of an action taken. In government, these uses of a written report can be very powerful.

Writing a report is thinking on paper. However, unlike speaking, writing allows you to be more careful in selecting and arranging your words. There is no magic formula to good writing. As Zinsser notes, good writing is "not a question of gimmicks.... It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest strength and the least clutter." (p. 6)

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

You should ask yourself at least six questions before you begin to write any report.

1) Why are you writing your report? Every report has a purpose. Be sure to identify the purpose before you start writing. Is this an evaluation report? A status report? A backgrounder? A policy analysis report? Be sure to ask the person or group for whom you are preparing the report what kind of a report they want.

2) For whom are you writing your report? Every report has an audience. The purpose and audience of a report determine what will be included in the report, and how it will be written. For example, when you write a report for the general public, choose words and phrases that allow a non-specialist to understand you. When you write a report upon which legal decisions may be made, use a writing style and approach which reflects legal conventions. When you write for an elected official or decision-making body, be sure your report reflects political realities.

3) What writing style will you use? The words you choose also reflect your audience and the report's purpose. This guide is being written in the second person ("you"). This is more personal and informal, allowing you, the reader, to sense that we are speaking directly to you. Sometimes the second person point of view may be too informal. Then you will want to choose the third person (he/she/it). The previous sentence, if written in third person, would read, "Then the writer will want to choose the third person." Use your best judgment in deciding what point of view you will use.

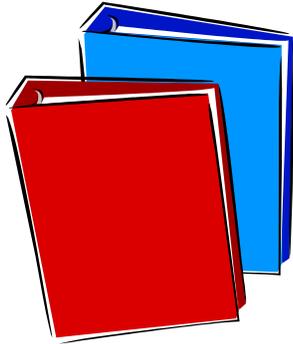
4) What is your relationship to the readers? What is their point of view? Is their common opinion similar to yours? How well does your reader understand the subject? Your report will reflect these issues as well. A report reviewing the effectiveness of Wisconsin's domestic abuse law, for example, will differ in tone, content and style, depending on whether it is written for police officers, for a community group, or for a college sociology class. Another way to think about this is to describe the role you have as a writer. Are you the "informed expert," a "professional administrator," or a "concerned citizen?" Do you want to be seen as distant, invisible and formal, or as personal, informal and approachable? Your role affects the tone of your writing, expressing your mental attitude, frame of mind, or relationship to the reader.

5) What is your relationship to the subject? Are you writing about performance evaluation systems from a researcher's perspective, or have you just experienced a system, and thus have a personal viewpoint? Imagine three reports about a fire: one written by a firefighter on the scene, one by someone who escaped from the burning building, and one by a newspaper reporter. Each of these reports would see the subject in a different way. Similarly, your report will reflect your perspective on the subject.

6) Finally, what do you want to happen as a result of your report? This will shape your report as well. A persuasive report directs the reader to a specific conclusion or to take a specific action. Facts are presented in such a way as to convince the reader. Expository, descriptive or narrative reports do not make specific recommendations. Expository writing is "just the facts," written in a clear, straightforward manner. Descriptive writing appeals to the senses; you create an image or a feeling

about the subject. Narrative writing describes a sequence of events from beginning to end. In these three kinds of reports you allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

There is an easy, though not foolproof, way to be sure that the report you have written will be understandable and accepted by your audience: ask someone from that audience to read and candidly react to it.



STRUCTURE AND PRESENTATION OF A REPORT

Once you have determined the purpose and audience of your report, think about how you will present the report, and how it will be structured. Structure and presentation will affect whether the report is read and accepted. Some questions to consider are: Will there be an oral briefing? Will the written report be accompanied by a more formal verbal presentation? Will there be an executive summary? If the report will stand by itself, is it likely that the intended audience will read a long report? These and other considerations should shape your report.

The beginning of the report contains information which helps the reader understand and use the report. Choose organizing information which will help the reader use your report. For example, your report may include some, but probably not all, of the following:

- Title Page
- Copyright Waiver Page (if there are copyrighted documents in the report)
- Letters of authorization, acceptance, or transmittal
- Abstract or Executive Summary
- Preface or Forward
- Table of Contents (only for a very long report)
- Lists of Tables, Illustrations, Figures

The body of the report usually has three parts:

- Introduction: may include the history of the project, its purpose and scope, its limitations, definitions of terms, the methodology used, and the organization of the report.
- Findings: discusses the results of the research, the experiment, or the program or project.
- Conclusions or recommendations: summarizes and analyzes information and data, and makes specific suggestions for action.

The end of the report may include endnotes, a bibliography, glossary, appendices, and/or an index appear.

A very long report should have an executive summary at the beginning of the report. This should be no longer than 20 pages. The executive summary gives the busy reader an overview of the project or program without having to read the entire report. It also may encourage or entice the reader into studying the full report in greater detail.



WRITING STRUCTURES

There are at least eight different ways to organize the information in a report. The structure you choose reflects the purpose, audience and subject of your report. Suppose, for instance, that you are writing a report about nursing home care. You could approach it in eight different ways:

Description. In description you describe the characteristics of a person, object, place, event, program or project, apart from any other object, person or program. You include many details in some kind of logical fashion. For example, if you are describing a nursing home, you might describe all the different services available, or you might describe a typical day in the life of a patient. You might also describe the characteristics of a typical client served by the home, or the features of the building, or the attributes of the program. What you describe depends on your purpose and audience.

Definition. Definition clarifies the meaning of a specific subject, particularly in a specific context. You move from a more general to a more specific definition. For example, in defining "nursing home care," you would begin with a definition of care given to patients and their families in general, and then move to a more specific definition of services. Definitions can be powerful tools. As a writer, you can use them -- ethically, or not so ethically -- to convince readers of the rightness of a program or action or conclusion.

Classification. In a classification approach, you describe various parts which make up the whole. Categories within a classification must not overlap. For example, you cannot have within the classification of "patients requiring additional nursing care" patients in a short-term intensive care unit, heart patients, and terminally-ill patients, since the categories may overlap. You might, however, include patients in short-term intensive care, non-terminal patients in long-term intensive care, and terminally-ill patients, since those patient groups do not overlap.

Comparison/Contrast. In this approach, you show how groups are alike or differ. You can do this in a number of ways: 1) by alternately comparing similarities and differences of the subjects; 2) by discussing all similarities first, and then all differences; or 3) by discussing all characteristics of one subject, and then moving on to the next subject, and the next. You may, for example, compare and contrast how counties manage nursing home care, how private providers manage such care, and how in-home caregivers provide care. Or, you might also compare the advantages and disadvantages of each approach to nursing home care.

Exemplification. Examples illustrate a point and strengthen a report. In your nursing home report you might provide specific examples of services provided to individual patients, or to groups of patients. Examples help the reader to understand terms, definitions, and topics.

Narration. Narration is a description of a sequence or chronology of events. Usually narration begins with the beginning (!) but sometimes a flashback may be more persuasive. Narration may often contain evaluations or judgments, sometimes explicit and sometimes implied. A narration may conclude with a statement about why this sequence of events is important or relevant. For example, you could describe the development of nursing home legislation, or the improvement in nursing home practices in the past ten years.

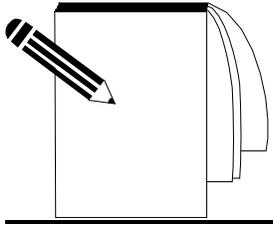
Process Analysis. This is more simply a "how to" report. It is a step-by-step instructional guide. A process analysis approach to a nursing home report would help the reader to conduct his or her own assessment of care.

Cause and effect. Cause-and-effect reports describe events so as to show that A causes B. This is tricky. You may oversimplify or make glittering generalities. Two events may happen simultaneously, or in immediate sequence, and yet not be related causally. For example, you might find that the ratio of length of stay to death increased in nursing homes after 1990. Without considering the changing nature of who becomes a nursing home patient, you could draw false conclusions. Another (non-nursing-home) example: if teenage pregnancy decreased in School X after the introduction of a comprehensive sex education class, you might conclude that the class caused the pregnancy decrease. What you might not have considered was that, at the same time, the school nurse began to provide contraceptive information. Therefore, the sex education class may have contributed to the pregnancy decrease, but it may not have been sufficient, in itself, to cause the effect. Turning correlated events into cause-and-effect phenomena is a common occurrence in our information-rich society. While we cannot prevent society from making that mistake, we should guard against it in our writing.

Just to demonstrate these approaches in another area, suppose you were writing a report about performance appraisal. You might include some of the following in your report:

- Description of approaches to performance appraisal
- Definition of the purposes of performance appraisal
- Classification of performance appraisal methods
- Comparison of performance appraisal systems
- Examples of performance appraisal methods you consider effective
- Description of past efforts in performance appraisal in your organization
- A process to be used in evaluating and adopting a new performance appraisal system
- A summary of research relating performance appraisal systems to productivity gains

The approach or approaches you choose is up to you – they depend on your purpose, your audience, and the skills and attitudes you bring to the report-writing process.



WRITING FROM AN OUTLINE

We all recall our high school English class, where we had to outline the paper before we wrote it. As adults, we sometimes forget to outline; frequently, we begin writing a report by beginning to write. Taking time to remember what your high school English teacher told you, taking time to outline what you want to say before you begin writing, will make for a better report. Ask yourself: What is my purpose? What do I want to say in the introduction? What will be included in each paragraph or section? How will I conclude?

The computer makes it much easier to think through the logic of a report, to move ideas from one section to another, and to prepare for the job of writing the report.

WRITING GOOD PARAGRAPHS

A good outline will help you to think about what paragraphs you should include in your report. Think about your report as being made up of paragraphs, each of which presents a single, well-developed idea. Each paragraph should focus the reader's attention on a single issue or subject. It should include all the points necessary to develop that idea, but no more. Irrelevant or extraneous points should be eliminated.

Each paragraph contains a topic sentence, which tells the reader what the paragraph is about. Good writers can place a topic sentence in the middle of the paragraph, but for most report writers, it makes good sense to make it the first sentence. Don't disappoint the reader by writing a topic sentence and then not discussing the topic in the paragraph; sentences within a paragraph should support or clarify the first, or topic sentence.

You can draw attention to ideas within your paragraph by repeating key words or phrases, by placing important ideas at the beginning of the paragraph, by emphasizing logical progression, or by using descriptive, visual words. Notice how two "paragraphs" present the same information in different ways:

"The current performance appraisal system increases stress among employees. The nature of the performance interview, combined with the lack of clear standards, leads to uncertainty, intimidation, and anxiety."

"The current performance appraisal system increases stress among employees. One employee had an anxiety attack after the performance interview. Another filed a grievance, charging lack of clear performance standards. Yet another asked for a transfer to another department after a performance review which was satisfactory by our standards, but which made the employee feel inadequate and unappreciated."

The first paragraph identified parts of the performance review process which are troublesome, and suggested some consequences. The second paragraph was more personal, giving specific cases which demonstrate that the current system does not work. Both paragraphs, however, can stand alone; each has a topic sentence which is supported by facts or details within the paragraph.

While each paragraph must be able to stand on its own, it should also guide the reader to the next paragraph as well. The first sentence in a paragraph should show the relation to the previous paragraph. This is known as "transition," and may be the trickiest part of good writing. Transitional words and phrases are road signs, and some of the more common ones appear in Appendix 1.

WRITING GOOD SENTENCES

Writing good sentences takes practice. The resources listed at the end of this guide can help you. There is one general rule: where possible, write short sentences in active voice. An active-voice sentence ("He wrote the report.") is generally more powerful than a passive-voice one ("The report was written by him.") Similarly, short sentences tend to be more powerful than long ones. By this we do not mean extremely short sentences. That would make for choppy writing. It is important, however, to avoid sentences that run on, and on, and on.

Good sentences are readable. A more readable sentence, or a paragraph or report, is a better communication tool, and that is what writing is all about. Part of readability is based on sentence length. We discuss readability further in the next section.

Good sentences follow the rules of correct grammar. Poor grammar is widespread in our world today, but that is no excuse for allowing it to creep into your writing. A simple grammatical mistake -- using "it's" when you mean "its", for example -- weakens your stature as a writer and, therefore, the authority of your report. Almost everyone, except, perhaps, an English professor, could use a grammar review. We recommend Strunk and White's Elements of Style as an excellent summary of some of the biggest grammatical stumbling blocks in modern English usage. (Note: do NOT rely on your computer to catch your grammatical mistakes. A computer is not smart enough to know if you mean it's or its, or there or their or they're.)

Finally, good sentences use well-selected words. If you are able to put together words in convincing visual images, you will find that writing is more enjoyable and the product more satisfying to both you and the reader. In the next section we will spend more time on words.



WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

The right word used correctly is a powerful tool. Knowing the right word requires that you pay attention to how others write, to the words they use, and to the words that are most meaningful to you as a reader. A good vocabulary is essential to good writing.

Choose words carefully. In this era of computers, and their self-contained thesauruses, it would seem easy to write in a richer fashion. However, a computer thesaurus can be misused as easily as a hard copy. You probably would not substitute "command" for "require" in the following sentence: "What healthy babies require is good prenatal nutrition." You might make the substitution in this sentence: "The director requires that everyone attend the meeting." However, the feeling or sense of the altered sentence is very different from the original. Yet the thesaurus -- on computer or in hand -- gives "require" and "command" as synonyms. The message is simply this: be very careful in choosing your words.

Use words to create images. Simple words can be very powerful when combined in visual images. Adjectives and adverbs can add color to your writing, but you must be careful not to overuse them. Some verbs and nouns used alone are more descriptive than strings of adjectives and adverbs. "Darted," for example, can replace "moved quickly." "Sanctuary" says more than "a safe, quiet place to rest."

Analogies and figures of speech can make your writing more visual. The dangers of Communism were made clearer by the "domino effect" in the 1950's. "Warehousing" of patients provides a clear image of how clients are being treated. Overuse of analogies and figures of speech, however, can weaken, rather than strengthen, your presentation.

Use concrete words where possible. Concrete words are almost always better than abstract ones. It is easier for the reader to understand what you are saying if your words are concrete. "Large numbers of complaints have been received." is not as clear as "Thirty complaints were received in the last week; this is 50% more than received in a similar week last year." Of course, it is easy to use concrete words to mislead, as well. Consider, for example "Last year this correctional facility had twice as many high school graduates as the previous year." This is concrete, but misleading, since in fact the facility had two boys graduate this year, and only one last year .

TO SUM UP

Writing a report is not rocket science. It's not child's play either. You need to remember why you are writing your report, for whom you are writing your report, what approach you want to use, and how you want to write. Never forget, however, that it is your report. It should reflect who you are (both personally and professionally). Sometimes this takes some soul-searching! The time you take to prepare for writing a report, however, will more than pay for itself in a clearer and more convincing product.



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